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ABSTRACT

The sex role preceptions and behavior of female college students were examined in this study. Using an exchange theory orientation, it was hypothesized that role perceptions and related behavior patterns are related to the rewards and costs a woman expects to result from the performance of masculine and feminine behaviors. The women first completed a series of sex role scales and then participated in group discussion sessions with male confederates. The results support a social reinforcement orientation to sex role perceptions and behavior, and suggest that in order to change women's role perceptions and actual behavior, a change in the outcomes available for alternative behavior patterns is essential. (Author)

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SEX ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR

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Sex Role Perceptions and Behavior

Sex role perceptions constitute an individual's beliefs concerning what behaviors are appropriate for males and females in a particular situation. Although it is probable that societal role expectations have some influence on role perceptions, other variables are also important, especially when societal role expectations are in flux. Since sex role expectations are currently quite ambiguous in North American society (Angrist, 1969; Rappaport, Payne and Steinmann, 1970b), role perceptions have considerable importance for understanding individual behavior. This study examines women's sex role perceptions and actual behavior.

Although male and female roles have often been seen as specifying behaviors which are mutually exclusive (e.g., Podell, 1959), recent discussions have centered on the possibility that these roles involve independent sets of behaviors which can be performed in any combination (Bem, 1974, 1975). That is, behaviors which have been traditionally labeled feminine are not simply the opposite of masculine traits, but constitute independent and positive qualities in themselves. On the individual level, current discussions of sex role issues have altered many women's perceptions and behavior by making behavioral alternatives both more salient and more acceptable. Elements of both traditional male and female roles have been synthesized, in various ways, to yield a wide range of beliefs concerning appropriate feminine behaviors.

In previous research the content of women's sex role perceptions has been related to many sociological and personality variables (see, for example, Lipman-Blumen, 1972; McKenzie, 1972; Rappaport, Payne and Steinmann, 1970a). The present study examines the function of sex role perceptions from an exchange theory perspective (Homans, 1961; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Human interaction

can be viewed as an exchange system through which individuals attempt to maximize their outcome level in social situations by exchanging rewards and costs with other actors. Using this perspective, role perceptions are seen as behavioral guidelines which reflect the individual's expectation concerning what behaviors are likely to earn rewards and avoid costs in a certain type of situation. However, behavior in any specific situation is dependent on the outcome level the person sees as resulting from various behavioral alternatives in that situation at that point in time. If the individual has no information concerning his or her interaction partner, role perceptions, as general guidelines, would strongly influence behavior. However, if an actor does have information concerning what his or her partner is likely to reward, actual behavior will be more strongly influenced by this factor.

In addition to expected rewarded behavior, several other variables were manipulated in this study to examine the relationship between role perceptions and behavior. It was expected that the perceived publicness of the interaction would influence behavior since the individual would be concerned with gaining the approval of the spectators as well as that of her interaction partner. The possible influence of satiation with social approval prior to the interaction was also examined.

The subjects for this study were 160 female students at the University of Florida who volunteered to participate in a study of group discussion. Prior to the experiment they were contacted by a survey team studying women's roles and were asked to complete a questionnaire which was apparently unrelated to the study for which they had volunteered. Among other scales in the questionnaire were two of central interest to this study. One, a modification of Bem's Sex Role Inventory (SRI) (1974), measured the subjects' perceptions of appropriate behavior for women in social and work situations. Total sex role perception

scores (SRP) were generated using 30 adjectives selected from the SRI and subjects were classified in one of two groups on the basis of whether they saw feminine or masculine behaviors as more appropriate for women in a work situation. Eight of these adjectives, four masculine and four feminine, were selected for direct focus in the study: acts as a leader, assertive, aggressive, analytical, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, warm and yielding.

The other scale of interest to this study measured the perceived outcome level of the sex role behaviors examined in the SRP. This scale examined the women's beliefs concerning the probability of certain reactions (such as approval and disapproval) by a man in response to these behaviors as performed by a woman in a specific situation, and the degree to which individual women valued these reactions. A score for perceived outcome for each behavior was generated by multiplying the perceived probability of each reaction by its value and summing across possible responses. An equal number of positive and negative responses were used.

When the subjects reported for the experiment they were randomly assigned to one of 16 conditions in a 2x2x2x2 factorial design. The independent variables manipulated were the publicness of the interaction, the amount of social approval prior to the interaction, and the type of behavior the subjects expected the interaction partner to reward. Since two types of interaction (social and work) were examined, the order in which these interactions occurred was counterbalanced across subjects.

The women were told that they would work on two discussion problems in the course of the experiment, interacting on each problem with a different partner. Both partners were male confederates of the experimenter. Half of the women were informed that a tape of their interaction would be used for class demonstrations (public condition) and the remaining subjects believed them to be

confidential. In the first interaction the amount of social approval was manipulated by the confederate either approving or disapproving most of the subject's suggestions. Prior to the second interaction the subject listened to one of two tapes on which her next partner gave the impression that he approved of women using either a "masculine" or a "feminine" approach to problem solving. For half of the women hearing each tape, this approach was consistent with their own beliefs as expressed in the SRP and for half it was inconsistent.

The interaction between the subject and the second confederate was videotaped through a one-way mirror. Either before or after working on the discussion problem the dyad was asked to sit and talk for a few minutes while some equipment was fixed. This period constituted the social interaction and the actual discussion session was considered as a work interaction. Five minute segments from the work and social interaction tapes were shown to three raters who, after selecting criteria, counted the number of statements which typified each of the eight behavioral adjectives listed previously. Inter-rater reliability on this task was .75.

The results of the study clearly support a social reinforcement orientation to role perception and behavior. The data are consistent with an exchange theory interpretation, and suggest that behavioral outcomes influence women's beliefs concerning appropriate behavior patterns and their performance of role related behaviors.

An analysis of the data indicated an overall correlation of .32 between the perceived appropriateness of a behavior and the net reward level seen as resulting from it ($p < .001$). Behaviors included in the sex role perception tend to be those which have a good probability of producing responses in others which are valued by the individual. As exchange theory suggests (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959), behaviors which repeatedly yield positive outcomes acquire a sense of rightness and constitute rules for attaining high outcomes in social

interaction. The relationship between perceive appropriateness and perceived outcome is stronger for the feminine characteristics than for the masculine ones ($p < .03$). It may be that women have considerable experience with feminine behaviors from an early age and develop clear ideas about their probable outcomes.

The results show that, overall, behaviors consistent with the sex role perception are performed more often than behaviors seen as less appropriate ($p < .0001$). Role perceptions, then, do function as guidelines for behavior in social interactions. Although the data concerning women's behavior in the social situation indicated several interesting relationships, the analyses for the work setting showed few significant differences. The group role of "team member" for the work situation is a highly structured one, and it may be that under these conditions, the influence of the social role of "woman" is relatively low. In a social situation group role demands are less specific and the influence of social roles is greater.

It was originally expected that women who believed behavior they saw as less appropriate were going to be rewarded in an interaction would be less likely to perform these behaviors in a public situation because of the assumed high cost of performing behaviors in public which one believes to be inappropriate. The results suggest that this assumption concerning the high cost of inconsistent behaviors was not warranted. However, an interesting pattern appeared. In the work situation, when the women believed that others would be aware of their behavior, they performed a high number of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors as they themselves defined them. In the nonpublic setting they concentrated almost exclusively on behaviors they saw as appropriate for a work situation ($p < .05$).

These findings, although not predicted, are consistent with exchange theory.

theory. In a public setting, an individual is concerned with impression management as well as with private self-image maintenance. The positive impression one can make on another individual is a source for positive outcomes, even if no face to face interaction occurs. In the public interaction, women were told that their group discussion would be used for class demonstrations. Since the expected audience probably represents a wide range of opinions, the performance of a wider range of behaviors maximizes the probability of creating a positive impression on the audience. When a woman believes that few people will be aware of her behavior, a primary source for positive outcomes lies in the maintenance of a positive self-image. Under these circumstances women perform more behaviors consistent with their role perception.

Both Homans (1961) and Thibaut and Kelley (1959) suggested that individuals become satiated with specific outcomes (such as social approval) and are, as a result, less likely to perform behaviors which yield these outcomes than other actors. The results of this study clearly do not support this hypothesis, at least for short periods of social approval. Social interations following social approval are characterized by a higher number of behaviors consistent with the sex role perception, and those following disapproval show a higher number of behaviors seen as inappropriate ($p < .05$). It seems plausible that during the first interaction, women select behavior patterns consistent with their sex role perception because they have no information concerning the specific outcomes available in the interaction. When social approval occurs during the interaction, these behaviors are reinforced and occur more frequently in subsequent interactions. When a woman encounters disapproval, the performance of behaviors seen as appropriate is reduced and inappropriate behaviors become more frequent.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed that behaviors which are repeatedly enacted in a situation become so habitual that they may occur reflexively, regardless of the potential outcomes available for other behaviors. It may be

that a similar process occurs with behaviors which have been recently strongly reinforced. Possibly these behaviors become more primary in the behavioral repertoire and temporarily inhibit the choice of a profitable behavior pattern.

The results of this study provide some interesting insights into the relationships between sex role perceptions, expected outcomes of behaviors, and the choice of a given behavior pattern in a social situation. These insights are relevant to analyzing the process of role change in women and suggest that in order to change both perceptions and behavior for women, a change in the outcomes available for alternative behavior patterns is essential.

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ED 011 148